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SUBJECT: BELGIAN LOCAL ELECTIONS -- FAR RIGHT STUMBLES,
COALITION PARTNERS FARE POORLY

REF: BRUSSELS 3382

11. (U) In elections for almost 600 communal and provincial council elections on October 8, the Flemish Liberal party (senior member of the governing four-party coalition) fared badly, as did its Francophone Liberal partner. Leaders of the Flemish Liberals have ascribed their poor showing on infighting, and anti-establishment sentiments in the public. They hope good economic news and the Prime Minister's talents on the hustings can help turn a dire situation around. The Socialists lost seats in some of their traditional bastions in the French-speaking part of the country, but feel confident they will be part of a coalition come federal elections next year. Christian Democrats had the most reason to smile. In Flanders and, to a lesser degree, in the French areas, Christian Democrats won back much of the ground that this traditionally dominant party lost in the 2000 local polls.

Has Vlaams Belang Peaked?

12. (SBU) The far right Vlaams Belang (VB) captured seats in a number of communes beyond its traditional heartland in and around Antwerp, but failed to achieve a hoped for breakthrough in larger cities, most notably Antwerp, where the current mayor gained a plurality. VB lost council seats in Ghent, suggesting to some observers that the far right wave had crested. A VB parliamentarian with whom we maintain discreet contact told poloff the party's leadership was extremely disappointed with its lack of success in the big cities, which he blamed variously on immigrant voters concentrated in these areas, and lackluster candidates and internal disorganization. Although our contact claimed VB had done well in the local elections, it was worried about "stagnation" and would review its strategy to determine "what happened in the major cities." The party hoped to do better next spring in the federal polls, aiming to get 25-30% of the vote.

Immigrants and Women Succeed

13. (U) Immigrants and women scored noteworthy gains. One-third of the newly-elected councilors are women, and the number of Belgians of immigrant descent (primarily of Moroccan and Turkish-origin) increased significantly. In the fifteen biggest Flemish cities, the number of foreign origin councilors more than doubled from sixteen to 40. In the Brussels communes, the increase was even more striking: from fourteen elected officials in 1994 (mainly of Arab origin), to 91 in 2000, and 145 in

2006, with representatives of Moroccan, Turkish, and Congolese origin, among others. With two exceptions, each of the nineteen Brussels communes now has at least one elected official of foreign origin. The gains were less spectacular, but still notable in the French-speaking region.

Comment: Liberals Out, Leterme In?

¶4. (SBU) Most analysts agreed the local elections gave the Christian Democrats momentum for next year's federal polls. While the local success of key Flemish Liberal Ministers offered the Liberals energy and hope for 2007, the Liberals are still in a deep hole, particularly on the economic front. The Flemish Socialists have warned their Liberal coalition partners to "straighten up," i.e., knock off the internal fighting, and get some successes to flaunt in 2007, starting with a sound budget, otherwise, according to a Flemish Socialist party official, "it will be the end of the purple coalition, and you might have the Christian Democrats and the Socialists in a coalition."

¶5. (SBU) Noting the gains made by the Christian Democrats, several commentators have pointed to Flemish CD&V leader Leterme as a, if not the, leading candidate for Prime Minister in 2007. On the other hand, the smart money here believes it is too soon to tell if he actually wants the job. It remains to be seen if Leterme can balance the demands of an alliance with the decidedly pro-Belgian state French Socialists on one side, and the Flemish nationalists in his own camp. Leterme's approach to constitutional reform talks early next year should give a good indication of his interest in the top job. If he wants the job, he is unlikely to strip the federal government of too much power. Korologos

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